

"The Real Cost of Prisons Comix"

(* Friends: Approximately one-in-every-four persons now incarcerated on the planet earth is incarcerated in the United States of America alone. Whereas 1 in every 245 white Americans was behind bars in 2006 (and 1 in 136 white males), for black Americans, the rate was 1 in 41 (and 1 in 21 black males), and for Hispanic Americans, 1 in 96 (and 1 in 54 Hispanic males).)

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The Real Cost of Prisons Comix

By Jenna M. Lloyd

Vivid comics show the impacts of mass incarceration on communities of color.

Locking 2.3 million people behind bars is a vast social project. It takes work to hide the equivalent of a large US city in plain sight. The explanations served up on the nightly news and by tough-on-crime politicians graphically focus on violent crime, despite its decline. More prisons, they say, will create safe and drug free communities.

The Real Cost of Prisons Comix (PM Press), winner of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency's PASS Award, asks whether the billions of dollars invested annually in mass incarceration delivers on these promises.

Hidden behind these fear-provoking images, the book documents the steep human costs exacted on individual health and freedom, family unity, and community well being. What else could be done with the social wealth and creativity now trapped into cycles of cage-building and neighborhood abandonment?

Through powerful graphics and a wealth of grim statistics *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix* depicts how the past 30 years of unprecedented prison growth have reshaped the landscape of our urban and rural communities. By showing the concrete work that goes into building and maintaining the prison-industrial complex- from the peddlers of fear to the parole officer-the book serves as a smart, accessible primer on the politics and economics driving prison expansion. Prisons are filled with people who have dreams, raise children, and belong to communities most will rejoin.

The RCPC shows visceral narratives of their lives and the collision of racism, poverty, sexism to trace the systematic ways in which mass incarceration builds on and exacerbates these powerful inequities. Most importantly, it suggests concrete alternatives that can help rebuild safe, healthy communities.

Shrinking the system becomes as important a harm reduction strategy as needle exchange and drug treatment.

Three accomplished comic artists collaborate with long time activists and draw on the work of dozens of researchers imprisoned people, and advocates, to examine one dimension of mass incarceration. Kevin Pyle's "Prison Town: Paying the Price" shows how millions of dollars poured into moving people hours away from their homes fails to generate promised economic growth for struggling rural communities.

In "Prisoners and the War on Drugs," Sabrina Jones takes on racial disparities in drug laws and policing practices that result in African American and Latino people comprising 93% of those incarcerated in New York, and that lock up more drug users than dealers.

Susan Willmarth's "Prisoners of a Hard Life: Women and Their Children" examines how women are the fastest growing group of people being imprisoned. Most women are imprisoned for non-violent crimes, half of them drug offenses. But lifetime bans on welfare, public housing, and student loans for felony drug convictions only exacerbate already serious problems of poverty, racism, abuse, and drugs women face in their daily lives.

The Real Cost of Prisons Comix grew out of a popular education project Lois Ahrens began in 2000. Since the first printing in 2005, over 115,000 copies have been distributed free of charge, and project's website receives over 30,000 page views each month. One of the great things about this book as an organizing tool is that it includes letters from readers of the comic books- imprisoned people, political organizers, policy makers, teachers, social service providers-which give us a sense of how resonant these comics have been, and all of the ways they have been put to work on the ground. The economic depression and fiscal crises facing so many states make the alternatives to mass incarceration the book outlines all the more timely. But it's also a time when the government is pouring even more money into locking up immigrants. Doing away with prisons isn't just an issue of pure economics, but will also require confronting the racism, economic inequalities, and sexism that work to fuel the futureless future that they represent.

Larson, a man who is imprisoned in Sing Sing, reminds us: "Anyone planning a prison they're not going to build for ten or fifteen years is planning for a child, planning prison for somebody who's a child right now." What dreams are never realized when billions go to jails and prisons instead of to rebuilding our decimated cities? The Real Cost of Prisons Comix gives us a solid place to begin building the healthy, safe, and free futures we want.